Levi ben Abraham, לויט חן לר' לוי בן אברהם. איכות הנבואה וסודות התורה ('*Livyat Ḥen. The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*'), edited with an introduction and notes by Howard Kreisel [The Goldstein-Goren Library of Jewish Thought 7] (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2007), 80 + 1023 pp., ISBN 965-342-936-1

The *Livyat Ḥen*, which only partly survived, was a very ambitious encyclopedia, composed towards the end of the thirteenth century by Levi ben Avraham of Villefranche, as an ideal implementation of Maimonides' project of showing the compatibility of Jewish faith and philosophy. The work had two successive redactions, one short version completed after 1276 and a second one, much larger, completed in 1295. Nevertheless, considering the fact that even the long version was further revised and enlarged by the author, one should rather speak of an open redaction, or even of a work in progress, incorporating potentially every new piece of information which Levi ben Avraham deemed fit to be added in successive revisions. This is not surprising, considering the proportions he envisioned for his work, nothing less than the entire field of knowledge recognized as authoritative in his time. It was divided into two large sections, called 'pillars,' the first called *Yakin*, according to the right pillar of the Temple of Salomon, and the second *Boaz*. The first pillar contained, in a further subdivision of five *ma'amarim*, the encyclopedia of all universalistic sciences, that is to say logic (1), mathematics and geometry (2), astronomy (3), natural sciences and psychology (4), and as the crown of sciences, metaphysics (5). The second pillar, dealing with specifically Jewish themes, comprises two *ma'amarim*, preceded by a general introduction on ethics. The first *ma'amar* is divided in three parts: the first one (object of the edition we are presenting here) is dedicated to 'The quality of prophecy and the secrets of the Torah;' the second part, called 'The secrets of faith,' deals with God's attributes, with prayer, miracles, providence and redemption. The third part deals with 'the work of creation' (*ma'aseh bereshit*). The second, and last, *ma'amar* of the second pillar is divided into two parts: the first one deals with the 'work of the chariot' (*ma'aseh merkavah*) and the second with aggadic matters. As already pointed out, this ponderous work, possibly also because of its dimensions, was not preserved in its entirety. Of the first pillar, only one *ma'a-*

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mar, the one dealing with astronomy, is entirely preserved (and has been described by Gad Freudenthal), whereas of other *ma'amarim* not a single word remains (for example, the parts dealing with logic and psychology), or just a few fragments are extant.

The editor of this impressive opus, Howard (Hayyim) Kreisel, who traced the intellectual map of a central idea in the encounter between reason and faith in Judaism in his monograph on the history of the concept of prophecy in medieval Jewish thought,[1] had already presented an important essay from this encyclopedia in 2004 when he published the text of the third part of the first *ma'amar* of the second pillar, that is the one devoted to the *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The massive volume presented here comprises, beside a very clear introduction, the edition of the first part of the same *ma'amar*, belonging to the second pillar. As a very useful appendix (pp. 777–906) to the main text, the editor publishes, on the basis of the manuscripts Oxford (Neubauer 1285) and Munich (Steinschneider 58), which is now reproduced and easily accessible on the Internet site of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek,[2] the preface to the first *ma'amar* of the second part of the second pillar, and the part devoted to the quality of prophecy and the secrets of Torah, allowing the reader to compare the work of redaction. It stretches from the short to the long version, and allows the reader to appreciate the expansion on the same subject and to have a glimpse into Levi ben Avraham's laboratory and into the philological workshop of the editor himself, because the short version has been used for the constitution of the text wherever necessary and possible. A second appendix (pp. 909–967) contains the edition of the relevant parts of the poem *Batte ha-nefesh we-ha-leḥashim* (the original kernel of a good portion of Levi ben Abraham's philosophical activity), with all the commentaries, from the one written by the same author, the nucleus of the future encyclopedia, the one by Salomon ben Menaḥem and a brief anonymous commentary. The reader is thus enabled to follow step by step the makings of this peculiar composition and its continued life among a tenacious readership, appreciating its didactic advantages, but also very well aware of its specific difficulties. In all these tightly connected texts,

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[1] Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*. Amsterdam Studies in Jewish Thought (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001).

[2] http://mdz10.bib-bvb.de/~db/bsb00003504/images/index.html.

the peculiar feature of Levi ben Avraham of Villefranche's philosophical stance comes very clearly to the fore: a systematic process of allegorization of scores of Biblical episodes and characters allows him to show in a vast amount of instances the compatibility of Biblical revelation and rational investigation. These meet, as was already the case for Maimonides, in a view of prophecy as moral and intellectual attainment of truth.

As far as the editorial method is concerned, Kreisel bases his edition on the only extant manuscript preserving the entire relevant portion of the text, the ms. Parm. 2904 (= De Rossi 1346) of the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma, recurring to the readings of the already mentioned manuscripts which preserve the shorter redaction any time the main manuscript does not bear a satisfactory text (and, in the appendix, reversing the direction, that is using the longer version to correct the shorter). A rich apparatus of notes, tracing an enormous amount of quotations or allusions and reproducing many passages which Levi ben Avraham condensed in his discussions, ease considerably the task of the reader in following the development of the argument. Since in approaching an encyclopedia of this dimensions, not every reader will feel the need of reading the book from the first page to the last, three very helpful indexes are added: one compiling all references to the Biblical, Rabbinic and philosophical literature; a comprehensive list of proverbial expressions attributed to the philosophers Plato and Aristotle or to the 'sage' and the 'poet' and, most valuable, an analytic index allowing a 'diagonal' reading in search of a specific topic or paving the way to lexicographical research into Levi ben Avraham's terminology. The very minor mistakes that one can detect here and there serve rather *ex negativo* as a confirmation of the correctness of this piece of work. Thus, on p. 17 of the introduction, 3031 should be 1303. In another minor error, the Latin inscription on p. 3, n. 1 and again (but with a different wording) on p. 777, n. 3, is reproduced less than correctly. It should be: "Boas liber tripartitus, de mysteriis legis, fidei, et opere creationis tractat." On p. 4, n. 14; "der Juden" should read "die Juden."

One can reasonably ask why this work remained unpublished for centuries. Was it an effect of Salomon Ibn Adret's ban on the excesses of allegorical exegesis, combined with the injunction to exclude young people under the age of 25 from approaching this sort of philosophization of Judaism for fear of devastating effects on their faith and moral discipline? It is true, as Kreisel remarks, that Levi ben Avraham

was careful enough in stating that the philosophical allegory does not exclude the literal meaning of the Biblical text and its truthfulness, and one can add that his display of a vast Rabbinical knowledge and his Halakhic activity should have been a sufficient guarantee of his reliability as a teacher and a source of inspiration. It is also true that, according to the traditional Rabbinic method, his philosophical views discovered a further dimension, or stratum, in the endless richness of Revelation, exactly parallel, although differently oriented, to the *sod* abundantly provided by the theosophical insights of the Kabbalists, which flourished in the same epoch. Interesting enough, at least one copy of the short redaction (in the ms. hebr. 58 of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek) is preserved in a Kabbalistic miscellany, containing among other things, the Sha'are Tzedeq by Joseph Gikatilla and the *Gan Na'ul* by Avraham Abulafia. Be it as it may, the *Livyat Ḥen*, although not completely forgotten, was *de facto* sparsely circulated, and exerted a modest influence on the development of exegesis in the following centuries.

One can be almost sure that the lack of diffusion of this work did not depend on its positive evaluation of Christianity: quite the contrary. Levi ben Avraham did not hide his aversion towards the major tenets of the Christian religion in writing down a separate confutation of Christianity on philosophical grounds (which was not preserved) and in a chapter on this theme in the first part of the last *ma'amar* of the second pillar (preserved only in the short version). On one occasion, he recalls approvingly the exegetical opinion of a Christian interpreter of the Bible. Kreisel's *crux*, as far as the possible source of this opinion is concerned, seems to me correct, but for the reason that it would not be easy to identify such an opinion which is very common among Christian exegetes since late antiquity. To make my point clear, I will quote the relevant passage, in chapter eleven of the first part (Kreisel, p. 285): וחכם אחד שלם נוצרי מחסידי אומות העולם פירש 'כספו לא נתן נשך. שאינו מדבר בהלואה; כי אין זה, [רק] בנתינת הצדקה, שהמעלה הנדולה ממנו, שאינו יודע למי נתנה ואין מקבלן יודע ממי נטולה. כי זה הוא הרצוי מענין הצדקה, כי אין זה על מנת לקבל שכר וכבוד מן המקבל, והוא שקרא 'נשך Now the extension of the allusion (rather than quotation) is already problematic and the reference, correctly given in a footnote (n. 110) by Kreisel himself, to Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Mattanot aniim* 10,8), shows that the second part stems rather from a traditional Rabbinic understanding of the value of selfless *tzedakah*. In other words, if the reference to a

Christian interpreter of *Psalms* 15,5 is limited to the identification of the real meaning of giving (as attributed to God), then the source is not easily found, because it is very common since Hieronymus through widely read medieval authors such as Robert Grosseteste or Thomas Aquinas. One could quote Hieronymus' commentary on a parallel passage, found in the book of Ezekiel (6,19): "Sed uide profectum: in principio legis, a fratribus tantum fenus tollitur; in propheta ab omnibus usura prohibetur, dicente hiezechiel: pecuniam suam non dedit ad usuram; porro in euangelio uirtutis augmentum est, praecipiente domino: 'feneramini his a quibus non speratis recipere.' [see Lk. 5,35] Sequitur in tertio decimo loco: et amplius non acceperit. Putant quidam usuram tantum esse in pecuniam; quod praevidens scriptura divina, omnis rei aufert superabundantiam, ut plus non recipias quam dedisti." It should be clear that I am not suggesting a direct source for Levi ben Avraham's statement, but rather that the connection, absolutely classical among Christian exegetes, between sentences such as Ps. 15,5 or Ez. 18 and the dictum of Luke 5,35, central in the Christian medieval reflection on usury, could have been retrieved from a score of possibile sources. In any event, this favorable quotation is rather an exception in the *Livyat Ḥen* and could be used only (if at all) to characterize Levi ben Avraham's openness of mind and large erudition, which could be confirmed with other more solid arguments.

One possible answer to the question raised above on the lack of success of the *Livyat Ḥen* is of a more general nature: on the time of its composition the atmosphere in many Rabbinic circles became increasingly hostile towards philosophy and even Maimonides with his remarkable authority as an Halakhist was heavily questioned. Consequently, the space for a *systematic* attempt at showing that the Bible and the philosophers were saying exactly the same thing was becoming increasingly narrow. If one looks for a more specific reason, a possible answer, although I consider it myself only partly satisfactory, is Levi ben Avraham's attitude towards miracles: in line with Maimonide's thought, he does not hide his view, according to which God acts rather through the natural laws than by suspending them or breaking them on particular occasions. Now, it stands to reason to argue that, if the laws of nature express God's will, their suspension could only come about through a contradiction in God's will. On the other hand, undeniably, the conclusion which looms behind the philosophical identification of God with nature

(according to the formulation generally associated with Spinoza) is usually not felt as an intimation that all is grace, or that every instant a miracle happens and every single event is a miracle in itself, but rather that faith in a personal God is deeply endangered. This explains the reaction in Adret's, and Spinoza's, time among religious authorities of different denominations. The marriage between philosophy and religion, although attempted, with differing grades of enthusiasm in several epochs of (Jewish) history, does not cease to seem a *mésaillance*, and not in the most common sense of a marriage among socially unequal partners, but a relation where both partners have much to lose and little to win. Not only to lose religious faith (as Adret feared), but also to lose any faith in the ability of philosophy to decide about the claims of truthfulness of any transcendent revelation. Athens and Jerusalem are not destined to wed or to have a happy married life, but it seems that they cannot even ignore each other and keep their relation at a respectful reciprocal distance. Rather, they oscillate in a pendulum-like motion, and Levi ben Avraham's work is a good example of an excess in closeness, followed quickly by a reaction of distance and closure. One can be grateful for Howard Kreisel's painstaking work, which allows the reader to follow one moment of this process at the height of the (provisional) identification between religious revelation and philosophical inquiry.

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